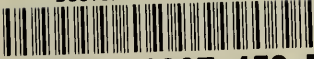


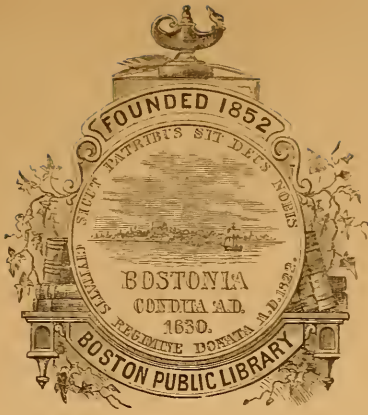
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SPEECH

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OF

JAMES M'DOWELL, JR.

(OF ROCKBRIDGE,)

IN THE

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HOUSE OF DELEGATES OF VIRGINIA,

ON

THE SLAVE QUESTION:

Delivered Saturday, January 21, 1832.

SECOND EDITION.

This second edition of the speech of James M'Dowell, Jr. on the "Slave Question," is published by gentlemen who are favorable to the views advocated by Mr. M'D.

RICHMOND:

Printed by Thomas W. White, opposite the Bell Tavern.

1832.



SPEECH.

MR. SPEAKER: There are many circumstances connected with the protraction of the present debate, which make it, personally, undesirable for me to enter upon it now. The various bearings of which it is susceptible have been explored; the principles on which the decision of it should finally rest, have been stated and examined; the stores of argument and of fancy have alike been drawn upon to sustain and relieve it—the whole ground repeatedly, ably and successfully pre-occupied. In this situation, silence, especially by one whose habits commend it to his observance, and whose legislative duties have entirely detached him from the immediate subject of debate, (a debate, too, *unexpectedly* introduced,) can only be broken with positive disadvantage. And, sir, I would not break it now; I would not open the lips which discretion should seal, were it not that the question which we are discussing, and the discussion itself, have brought a crisis on the country; have brought up a measure for decision here, of such eventful influence over the social structure and condition of the State, as to demand, imperatively demand of every member that, guided only by his judgement and his conscience, he should stand forth, firmly and deliberately, and take his position upon it. In doing this, I desire that my reasons may accompany my act. Sir, if there ever was a subject thrown before the public councils of any people, which involved a crisis in their affairs, that subject is before us now, view it in what aspect you can and decide it as you may. It is one whose consequences go more to the peace and power of this Commonwealth; to that of the whole slave-holding portion of our Union—possibly to that of the Union itself—one which will awaken throughout the Continent of America a deeper response of sympathetic feeling, and will comprehend in its final results, a wider range of operation upon intellectual and moral and christian man, than any to which the Legislature of Virginia has ever been directed. Cast your eye for a single instant over that volume of consequences to our own and to the millions of another race, whose destinies are complicated with ours in this measure—cast your eye to these as they lie folded up in the proposition on your table—and you will at once perceive that it is not in the power of rhetorical extravagance to give to that proposition any factitious weight; that it is not more than competent for language itself, enervated as its strong terms have become by familiar use, adequately to impress a suitable conception of its character. We, sir, to whom it is given to *originate* and dispose of the measure from which these consequences will flow, to be the actors in this new scene of legislation, will stand out in the foreground of our country's history—prominent on its canvass—the subjects of curious interest and of various animadversion,

to the statesmen and the philanthropists of after-time. Thus elevated by the circumstances in which we are casually placed, to a peculiar association with the future fate of the Commonwealth, I, for one, am deeply sensible, both to the responsibility and the distinction of the posture; deeply sensible to the anxious call which Virginia makes, in this trying hour of her fortunes, upon the calmest wisdom of her public men; and am gratified—nay, am proud, that as one, and an humble one, of these, it is permitted me to respond to that call, by uniting with others in the indication and support of a policy which, however startling at the first sight, is the only one in which a sure guarantee can be found for the great interests of the State, or for the permanent security and happiness of the citizen. This policy, which has long been repressed by unmanly apprehensions or smothered as the dream of impracticable benevolence; discoursed of by the statesman only in his closet; and breathed by the christian only in a silent prayer for his country:—this policy, I think Heaven, can, at last, be debated in the face of day—in the face of assembled multitudes—can be brought for judgement to the bar of reason, and searched and decided by the lights of truth.

Adverting to the course of debate, that I might collect from it the prominent points on which it has been conducted, and as far as practicable, examine them myself, I regret that any one of them has been lost to me—regret especially, that I was casually prevented from hearing the remarks of the gentleman from Petersburg, (Mr. Brown,) as well because they have been represented as exhibiting a favorable specimen of intellectual power, as because of their assuming some new grounds of argument. Not having heard them, however, and no report of them yet existing for reference, they are inaccessible to me for any purpose, either of criticism or conviction. So far as the debate has come within my knowledge, no direct inquiry has been made into the relative capacities of the negro and the white man, as *laborers*—as the mere agents of production. This inquiry seems to have been estopped by the general, I believe, universal concession, that slavery was an “evil.” Thus, sir, a branch, necessary to the full investigation of the subject, and one upon which the expediency of a gradual emancipation can well be supported, has been indirectly closed. I say well supported, because no proposition can be more easily or conclusively established, both by general deduction from the principles of human nature, and by observed facts, than *this*, that the labor of a free white man, in the temperate latitude of Virginia, is more productive than that of a slave—yielding a larger aggregate for public and for private wealth.

But it is not in this relation, not as a laborer of equal or of less capability than the white man, that the negro has been considered; he has been considered chiefly as an *alien element* in the composition of our civil society, as constituting a class which cannot be otherwise than perpetually distinct—necessarily discordant with that which governs him—between whom a common sympathy is impossible, and whose existing rights admit of no melioration. It is under this view of the negro’s situation here, that the case of gradual emancipation has been argued—that the question has been put and controverted,

whether upon a comprehensive estimate of our permanent interests, it is most expedient to retain him as a slave, or to liberate and remove him? Whilst, however, it is admitted, that slavery is a hostile principle in any society and government, especially in one like ours, and therefore, an "evil," it is nevertheless maintained to be an evil so interwoven with the habits and rights of our people as to be incorrigible by any means consistent with these, and at the same time, within our reach; and upon this double view of the case, the efficacy, as well as propriety, of legislation upon it, is challenged.

Your committee, sir, declare that legislation "*at present is inexpedient:*" The amendment proposed, and now under discussion, declares the contrary. Believing that the amendment takes the true ground, I shall endeavor to sustain it: and in so doing, will present the considerations which I have to submit without reference to method, and without limiting myself to the only point which is strictly before us, that of expediency, I will, under the sanction of the general example, look a little to the *mode* of legislation also, and see whether there be any principle on which it may be justly and rightfully exercised.

Whatever it may have been, it is no part of our legislative duty, at this day to inquire, whether slavery does or does not consist with the first and leading principle of a Republic; nor is it necessary to determine whether the permission of it here does not form one of the most striking instances upon record, of a people resolutely violating towards others, that principle of absolute freedom on which they erected their own independence, and which they were the first to proclaim to the world as the only just and admissible rule of popular government. Forbearing inquiry into the coherence of slavery with the abstract *principles* of our government, I shall not make the question of its coherence with the abstract principles of morality, and will not, as some gentlemen have done, consider the position, whether, morally, we have any warrant for it or not. Upon this point angry controversies have long been maintained. The absence from the Bible, of any direct reprobation of the practice of slavery, the qualified admission of it, under the Mosaic Law—the double reference which is made to it in the Decalogue itself, the recognition of it by St. Paul in a specific case, (the case of Onesimus,) and the identity of the words, servant and slave, in the etymologies of the Greek language, the original language of the Testament, are all of them so many points of argument on one side, rebutted on the other, and powerfully rebutted by the fact of man's original equality of rights, equality of responsibility as a moral agent, and by the great canon of the divine law, which enjoins upon all to perform to others the duties which we exact for ourselves.

But, sir, whether the slave, as the descendant of Ham, suffers under a primitive curse—whether he is graduated in his intellect, by Providence, for the post which he actually occupies in the labors of the world—or whether he belongs to another family of nations, the family of Cush, and has sprung from ancestors illustrious in history, the reformers of Ancient Egypt, the authors of arts and learning—nay of the very alphabet itself—whichever of these suppositions be the true one, and curious and instructive as may be the learning by which they are respectively maintained, they may yet be decided either way without

in the least affecting him as he is known to our laws—in the least affecting him as the proposed object of practical legislation. It is only as such an object, and not because of any speculative matter connected with his history, or with our right to his services as a slave, that I intend to regard him now.

The impracticability of legislating in any useful manner, for the ultimate emancipation and removal of the slaves of this Commonwealth, has been assumed in the course of debate by many gentlemen, and all attempts having that object in view, have, in consequence, been denounced by them as not only unwise, but improper and dangerous. This assumption is a violent one. With thousands of examples around us of what it is possible for the human mind to accomplish when it is exerted upon other objects of interest or pursuit, we have no reason to presuppose a failure to its exertions in the case before us. If it is a case of much difficulty, it is also one of more than correspondent importance—one which must, of *necessity*, be reflected on, which must engross the energies of the public mind as it engrosses to the last degree, the public security and repose. The difficulties in the way of legislation are not more positive than are the necessities for it; they go hand in hand, increasing with every hour of delay: and that these difficulties are not removable by some scheme easily prepared, and to which, when it is prepared exception cannot be taken, is no more than what is true of every other complicated subject, and constitutes a reason, not for abandonment, but for a more painstaking perseverance. Of all others, the objection to this measure, that it is difficult—the assumption that it is impracticable, is made with the worst grace by us who have just entered upon the threshold of its investigation; by us, who are employed for no other end than that of adjusting these very difficulties as they arise in the public business, and who have received the whole constitutional power of the State in the express confidence that, devoting our time and talents exclusively to the trust, we would apply it to this or any other purpose which the situation of the community might require. Had the difficulty of an enterprise been made a rule for avoiding or deserting it, in the ordinary undertakings of life, as gentlemen would have it to be in that which is proposed for the public, we should have been enriched by none of the acquisitions of science or art, and society, at this day, would have had little to distinguish it from that of a primitive and barbarous age.

Allow me, sir, in this connexion, to refer to a declaration of an illustrious man of another country. It was once asked of Sir Isaac Newton, by an admirer who was confounded at the splendid results of his science, how it was possible for him to have reduced all the phenomena of the Heavens to a few elementary and easily intelligible principles of calculation? “I never could have done it,” was the reply, “otherwise than by *long, laborious, and patient thought.*” This reply is admonitory to us, and we may profit of it in our present speculations. We have a problem, a practical problem, to discuss and to settle which demands this process of thought beyond every other one on which the mind can be employed, which takes continents and ages into its scope of operation, and which, thereby, involves an influence on the sum of human happiness so immeasurably greater than any

with which the results of speculative science could affect it, that all the problems of all the schoolmen and philosophers seem, in comparison of this, to be little more than the day-dreams of a profitless and visionary abstraction. Let us but give our minds patiently and laboriously to some plan of gradual emancipation and removal, and we need not fear the result—need not fear but that some one will be devised which shall be just in its principle, and, for the most, satisfactory in its details. Several have already been presented—characterized, indeed, by features of more or less imperfection, but, nevertheless, in refutation of the idea that any one was impracticable and principally repugnant to those who, believing that all schemes are improper, can the more easily imagine that all are defective. Enough has been prepared to show that the subject is practicable: enough has not, and never will be prepared to satisfy predetermined hostility.

The example of our ancestors, in this matter, has been plead against legislative action on it now. They, and they only, it has been said, were competent to undertake and perfect the proposed experiment on our slave population. The case of emancipation, if ever manageable, was manageable by them; the difficulties which now oppress it were less embarrassing then, and yet they were deemed to be too overpowering to be grappled with. Hence it is argued, that the case having changed for the worse, the imprudence of legislating upon it has become greater, and that what, in this respect, was merely unwise for our ancestors to attempt, would be madness for us. Now, sir, besides the double error, both in argument and in morals, of claiming a faulty example for imitation—a slight examination into the early circumstances of slavery in this Commonwealth, will shew, that the change in these, which has since taken place, and upon which all legislation is now denounced, is precisely the change which justifies and requires it. With a far smaller number of negroes than we have, if it was more easy for our forefathers to emancipate and deport them, it was less necessary: no motive but that of moral duty demanded it; personal safety was not implicated in the question; the general considerations of expediency which now operate, were unfelt, and the fact that the negro was then more valuable as a property, and less dangerous as a man, was an additional persuasive for contentment with the policy that enslaved him. That schemes for his emancipation were therefore discouraged, is no more than should have been expected: that they should have been formed and pressed as an offering of voluntary justice, uncalled for by private interest or public necessity, would have been more extraordinary and much more at war with the principles of our nature!

At that day, the sentiment of the world generally was less adverse to this institution of slavery than it is at present, and the sentiment of our own country admitted towards persons, of a much greater restriction upon the principle of absolute equality than it does now. At that time too, our agricultural wants sent us in quest of laborers for the field—our forests were to be levelled—our low-lands to be fitted for culture, and the staple which for many a year brought wealth to the planter and afforded perhaps the original pretext for the importation of the slave, was nearly or quite limited to the production of our own

soil. Hence the labor of the slave was more necessary and more profitable. Then also an immense territory was open to his admittance and an unrestrained exportation supplied the ready means of disposal for all which the convenience or interests of our citizens might require to be sold. Now, this outlet for the vicious or redundant portion of this people is closed—the forests which burdened the labors of our ancestors have disappeared, and the peculiar staple which rewarded them has been scattered far and near through the Union.

From this it results, that the slave now lives amongst us when he is less wanted—less profitable—less tolerated by public feeling, and when his accumulation, which was never influenced by moral restraint, is no longer repressed by that positive check which a foreign and an open market had afforded. Our present relation to the slave, therefore, is widely different from what it has been, and the several particulars in which this difference consists are several arguments for making him the subject of immediate legislation. He might, or he might not, have been made such by our ancestors, in some degree, at their discretion: no motive of private interest imperatively urged them to the step, and although a sound policy which looked to future results would then, as now, have made it wise, yet there was no necessity like the present, which superseded all choice and made it indispensable.

Were the example of the period adverted to, or of any period to be preferred to the decisions of our own reason in the discharge of our own duties—were it a just rule of action that those who control the public welfare of one age should yield a prescriptive obedience to the policy of the age that went before it, then it were but a small consolation to know that the circumstances under which this sacrifice of moral and mental independence is required, are the same with those upon which that policy was originally established. Here, however, this is not the case; and the example invoked for imitation, is an example misapplied.

But if it were otherwise—if the past and present circumstances which qualify the propriety of legislating on the subject in issue, were essentially the same, the example proposed for adoption, should be rejected—it is unworthy of acknowledgement—unworthy of obedience—an example of error, and it is no part of the better spirit of the day in which we live, to canonize error, because of its antiquity—no part of that spirit, to permit the sentiment of veneration for the dead, which softens the worst of their acts, and which sheds a salutary and healing influence upon individual feeling, to hallow a ruinous example to national observance. Sir, if our ancestors had exerted the firmness which, under higher obligations, we ourselves, are called upon to exert, Virginia would not, at this day, have been mourning over the legacy of weakness, and of sorrow, that has been left her—she would not have been thrust down—down—in a still lowering relation, to the subordinate post which she occupies in the confederacy whose career she had led—she would not be withering under the leprosy which is piercing her to the heart.

Who will say that this Commonwealth is what she would have been without this alien population in her bosom, that her people are as happy, her power as great, her geographical divisions as perfectly

